



Frequently Asked Questions about Inclusive Education¹ for Students with Significant Disabilities²

FAQ #1: What are the legal barriers to educating students with significant disabilities in heterogeneous general education classes?

The original purpose of PL 94-142, the Education of All Handicapped Children Act, was to ensure access to a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE), to establish procedural rules, and to guarantee due process. This legislation was enacted in 1975 when the field of special education did not yet consider that students who had significant disabilities could be educated in general education classrooms. Subsequent reauthorizations of the law (as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA]) have raised expectations for all students to make progress in the general education curriculum, but have not changed to reflect our growing understanding of the benefits of teaching students with significant disabilities in heterogeneous general education classrooms and other inclusive contexts. Congress continues to resist incorporating language around educational best practices related to inclusive education. This is due, in part because, of the requirement that special education programs be individualized, and a reluctance to standardize what good educational practices are for all students with disabilities.

A key barrier is the language of the law itself that maintains options for segregation that are in conflict with the intent of federal civil rights legislation. The following examples show how IDEA language regarding “the continuum of alternative placements and services” and the definition of “the least restrictive environment” are a barrier to students’ inclusion.

- Although the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) clause states that a student with a disability cannot be removed from the general education environment unless “the nature or severity of the disability of a child is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily,” the federal regulations provide minimal direction on how this is determined. As a result there is great variation in how the LRE principle is operationalized across states and districts. In some states (e.g., Alabama, Iowa, New Hampshire, Tennessee, and Vermont) over 40% of students with intellectual disability spend 80% of the day in general education classrooms; in other states (e.g., Alaska, Arizona, California, Florida, Hawaii, Nevada, New Mexico, New York, and Rhode Island) between 70% and 80% of students with intellectual disability spend less than 40% of their day in general education classrooms or attend separate schools (United States Department of Education, 2011).
- Although the law does not *per se* foster placement decisions made by disability label or pre-conceived, limiting assumptions, local historical placement patterns are likely to maintain the segregat-

¹TASH advocates for inclusive education defined as “school communities based on social justice principles in which all students are presumed competent, are welcomed as valued members of all general education classes and extra-curricular activities in their local schools, fully participate and learn alongside their same-age peers in general education instruction based on the general curriculum; and experience reciprocal social relationships.”

²In this document, “significant disabilities” includes students with labels of intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, autism, deaf-blindness, or other complex needs that require intensive supports in order to learn, communicate, and leave school being college and career ready.

ed status quo. For example, if a district historically has placed students with more intensive support needs in a self-contained class, then it will continue to do so unless there is leadership at the state or federal level requiring a different practice. Furthermore, some states' funding schemes only provide funding for special education staff if it can be shown that the teacher has an actual classroom of students with particular labels. Thus, it might be difficult for a local district to justify state funds for a special education teacher whose students spend all of their time in a general education classroom with supplementary aids and services.

- Although IDEA requires participation by a general education teacher in the development, review, and revision of the IEP, the law is not clear that a general education teacher can deliver specially designed instruction within the context of a general education lesson.
- Misinterpretation of the principle of LRE allows for placement in special education classes or schools away from non-disabled peers, and away from the school the child would attend if not disabled, thus creating unnatural proportions of students with disabilities within certain settings.
- Misunderstanding of the regulations regarding Supplementary Aides and Services might encourage pull-out services, rather than push-in supports and services by staff in general education classrooms.
- Although the United States Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) monitors all states' placement data, there are neither incentives for states achieving, nor sanctions for states not achieving, a universal minimum percent of students being placed in general education classrooms.

FAQ #2: How are schools implementing Response to Intervention (RtI) and Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS) practices in ways that foster inclusive education?

RtI and PBIS are school-wide problem solving processes designed to reduce and prevent academic and behavioral challenges (Sailor, 2008/09). Although they were meant to provide alternatives to services in self-contained special education contexts, anecdotal evidence suggests that these processes might not be having the intended result; that is, it appears students are continuing to receive Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions in self-contained contexts.

Alternatively, Sailor and Roger (2005) describe an approach that melds elements of RtI and PBIS in a fully inclusive educational model. The Schoolwide Applications Model (SAM) is based on the following principles: general education guides all student learning; all school resources are configured to benefit all students; social development and citizenship is addressed school wide through PBIS; schools are democratically organized, data-driven, and use problem-solving systems; schools are welcoming and expect partnership with families and communities; and districts provide support for extensive systems-change efforts. This means that there are no self-contained special education classes and that when "special" places exist, they are used for all students at any given grade level who need to receive tutoring, or work in small groups or on special project.

SAM schools also maintain permanent problem solving, site based leadership teams that use data to monitor progress and plan differentiation and instructional interventions. Temporary teams might be pulled together, as needed, around a specific student. Funding and resources from all legislative sources are merged and used strategically to meet the needs of all learners in the building. In addition, staff members are whole school staff with differentiated, but blurred, roles. These roles are based on student and school need, rather than mandated by legislative language. Finally, in the SAM model, Tiers 2 and 3 interventions

are delivered in general education classes to any and all students who, based on progress monitoring, need them.

FAQ #3: How can families become more involved in promoting inclusive education at the local, state, and national levels?

In the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA, Congress reaffirmed that the education of students with disabilities can be made more effective by “strengthening the role and responsibility of parents and ensuring that families of such children have meaningful opportunities to participate in the education of their children at school and at home.” It also ensured “that educators and parents have the necessary tools to improve educational results for children with disabilities.” When it comes to inclusive education, however, parents/guardians are marked as uncooperative or combative when they advocate for such (Harry & Klingner, 2006; Hess, Molina, & Kozleski, 2006; Resch et al., 2010). Parents who have felt that their voices were not heard by schools and who possess the means and social capital have even moved their children to different schools or to different districts to obtain more inclusive education (Soodak, & Erwin, 1995; Kluth, Biklen, English-Sand, & Smukler, 2007). Others have exercised their right to legal recourse when all other means have been exhausted. Short of taking these drastic actions, what are effective strategies for parents to advocate for their children’s full inclusion in general education classes in their neighborhood schools?

It’s All about Relationships

Many parents have found that building personal relationships with school staff helps to overcome the “us vs. them” culture unintentionally created by the separate systems of “regular” and “special” education. Focusing on the development of positive relationships not only models what families want for their children’s educational experiences, but also demonstrates the underlying values of inclusive education, such as community, relationships, presuming one another’s positive intentions, and viewing everyone through a strengths-based lens.

More Alike Than Different ... More Typical Than Special

Parents who describe their children in positive terms, emphasizing their gifts and talents rather than their “limitations,” can help change the conversation from fixing or remediating children to talking about what supports they need for full membership and participation. One effective strategy for doing this is for parents to invite the members of their children’s school teams to be part of a MAP or PATH meeting <http://www.inclusion.com/bkpcpmapsandpath.html> where they describe their hopes and dreams for their children’s future – going to college, living in the community, having a job, falling in love and getting married – and the importance of an inclusive education in helping to achieve those dreams. As part of the IEP process, parents can advocate for descriptions of their children that portray them as multi-dimensional, complex human beings, rather than a collection of “can’t do’s.” Parents can advocate for their children’s IEP goals to be firmly rooted in the general education curriculum. Additionally, parents can express their wish that their children be welcomed into the school that they would attend if they did not have a disability, with the supports (i.e., supplementary aids and services) necessary for their full participation and learning.

Knowledge is Power

Parents/guardians who know the law and are conversant in educational best practices can be effective advocates for their children’s inclusion. IDEA mandates that states implement Parent Training and Information Centers (PTIs), and the national network of Parent Training and Information Centers (PTIs). It also mandates Community Parent Resource Centers (CPRCs) (<http://www.parentcenternetwork.org/>) as sources

of education and empowerment. PTI's (e.g., Maryland Coalition for Inclusive Education; Colorado PEAK Parent Center; Pennsylvania Parent Advocacy and Education Leadership Center) have long histories of supporting inclusive education. Several of the University Centers for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDDs) (e.g., The National Center on Inclusive Education at the Institute on Disability at the University of New Hampshire [<http://www.iod.unh.edu/inclusiveed.aspx>]; The Institute on Community Integration at the University of Minnesota [<http://ici.umn.edu/>]) offer a myriad of print, web-based, and training resources for parents/guardians. Many states, through their Governors' Councils on Developmental Disabilities, offer advocacy training to parents of children with disabilities through Partners in Policymaking (<http://www.partnersinpolicymaking.com/>). This 25 year old organization teaches parents and individuals with disabilities leadership skills, best practices, and tools for community organizing.

Strength in Numbers

Parents who work together with other parents and like-minded professionals often find that their impact is multiplied. At the local level, there are opportunities for parents of children with disabilities to become PTA leaders who can influence everything from the building of an accessible playground, to assisting with grant writing to fund inclusive recreational activities. At the state level, parents are represented on state-wide task forces that deal with educational issues, such as teacher certification, large-scale assessment, or assistive technology. Nationally, parents can become members of grant review panels, run for office within organizations that promote inclusive education (e.g., TASH; National Down Syndrome Congress), or run for Congress.

FAQ #4: Is inclusive education more costly than traditional special education service delivery models?

No. On a pure cost basis, all available evidence suggests that education in inclusive general education contexts is not more costly than the provision of services in self-contained special education contexts; in fact, over the long term, it might be less so. Odom and his colleagues (2001) found this to be true when they analyzed the instructional costs of traditional versus inclusive preschool programs. McGregor and Vogelsberg (1998) reviewed over 100 research studies and concluded that "while start-up costs initially might increase the cost of inclusive services, the costs over time decrease and are likely to be less than segregated forms of service delivery" (p. 69). Parrish (2001) from the Center for Special Education Finance concluded that the preponderance of evidence suggests that services in inclusive general education classes are no more expensive than services in self-contained classes. In fact, they might be less costly over time when investments in local school capacity increase, as funding for separate educational contexts decrease. For example, Michael Remus, a special education administrator in Arizona, saved over \$4 million when he brought all of his special education students back into their home district (M. Remus, personal communication, January 1, 2013).

When we analyze the cost-benefit of inclusive education, the rationale for inclusion is even stronger. Over 35 years of research has demonstrated the benefits of general education placement for students with disabilities. Studies have found that students with disabilities included in general education classes had better social and communication skills, higher academic achievement, wider social networks, and fewer behavior problems (National Center on Inclusive Education, 2012).

Imagine if all the money currently being spent on buildings, overhead, desks, and administration in separate educational settings were used to hire highly qualified personnel to work in general education classrooms? What if that \$40,000, or \$400,000, or \$4,000,000 used to transport students to out of district placements were used instead to improve the capacity of local schools to teach all children within the mainstream of general education? Would that not be the best use of our resources and help put an end to

the debate over the rising costs of *special* education?

FAQ #5: What research still needs to be done on inclusive education?

There is a fairly large research base that supports the positive impact that inclusive education has on the academic outcomes of students with significant disabilities (Buysse & Bailey, 1993; Freeman & Alkin, 2000; Jackson, Ryndak, & Wehmeyer, 2009; Ryndak, Morrison, & Sommerstein, 1999). Yet students with significant disabilities remain largely segregated from their nondisabled peers in educational settings. Furthermore, there is a much smaller research base around the post-school outcomes of these students. For example, the graduation rate for students without disabilities is approximately 75%; however, data show that the graduation (i.e., receipt of a regular diploma) rate of students with disabilities is 57% but only 37% for students with intellectual disabilities. The employment rate for people without disabilities is 69.1%, compared to 20.3% for people with disabilities. Additionally, individuals who spend more time in general education contexts have more independence in their post-school lives and exhibit greater levels of self-determination (Ryndak, Alper, Ward, Storch, & Montgomery, 2010; Ryndak, Ward, Alper, Montgomery, & Storch, 2010).

The following are recommendations for further research that would contribute to the knowledge base about effective educational services for students with significant disabilities in inclusive general education contexts.

Communication

- How can we increase access to communication systems, leading to improved communicative competency for students with significant disabilities so that all students develop symbolic language systems before they leave school?

Instruction and Assessment

- What constitutes effective practices for students with significant disabilities that lead to outcomes such as academic achievement, positive social relationships, prosocial behavior, self-determination, health, post-secondary education, employment, and an inclusive life in the community?
- What are the outcomes of discrete skill instruction versus other instructional models (e.g., cooperative learning, embedded or milieu instruction)?
- To what extent does learning for students with significant disabilities correlate to the underlying blueprints that will be used in the new Common Core State Standards assessments that the two GSEG consortia (i.e., National Center and State Collaborative; Dynamic Learning Maps) are developing?
- How can functional life skills be taught without compromising students' access to the general education curriculum and their relationships with classmates without disabilities?
- How can Universal Design for Learning principles and strategies accommodate students with significant disabilities?
- How do students with significant disabilities fit within RtI and PBIS models?

- What is the relationship between the quality of students' social relationships and learning?
- What supports, accommodations, and modifications facilitate learning grade-level general education standards?
 - How do highly qualified teams make support decisions?
 - What is the influence of learner characteristics on support decisions?
 - What technologies are most effective for promoting learning (e.g., assistive technology, AAC, instructional technologies)?
- Are there multiple pathways of skills and concepts that lead to key academic understandings (e.g., those being explored by learning progressions) that work for students with significant disabilities? Are there patterns in how these students learn that can be used to inform instruction?
- What are the intended and unintended consequences of next generation large-scale assessments?

Professional Preparation

- What are the characteristics of pre-service personnel preparation that promote the most positive educational and life outcomes for students with significant disabilities within inclusive general education contexts?
- What are the characteristics of ongoing professional development that promote the most positive outcomes for students with significant disabilities within inclusive general education contexts?

Educational Systems

- Would the elimination of categorical labeling promote improved outcomes for students with disabilities?
- What are the school organizational structures (e.g., personnel roles, scheduling and use of time, use of space, etc.) that promote high quality inclusive practices and outcomes?
- What administrative/leadership practices promote high quality inclusive practices and outcomes?
- How can inclusive practices be sustained beyond the initial start-up period?
- What funding models at the federal, state, and local levels promote effective and efficient use of resources leading to improved outcomes in inclusive classrooms and other contexts for students with significant disabilities?
- What practices promote effective home-school partnerships?

Post-School Outcomes

- What variables are most predictive of positive post-school outcomes?

- How do the post-school outcomes of students who were taught in inclusive settings compare to the outcomes of those taught in other contexts?

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